COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 9, 2006

SANTA MONICA BAY RESTORATION PLAN:
ZUMA CREEK RESTORATION

File No. 00-117
Project Manager: Bob Thiel

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to $113,398 to the National Park Service for restoration of 4.5 acres of riparian and upland habitat in Zuma Canyon, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.

LOCATION: Zuma Canyon, Santa Monica Mountains, Los Angeles County (Exhibits 1 and 2).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Regional Location map

Exhibit 2: Map of Zuma Canyon and project location

Exhibit 3: Aerial photo of Zuma Avocado Grove Work Area

Exhibit 4: SMBRC Resolution 06-04 (April 20, 2006)

Exhibit 5: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution, pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

"The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thirteen thousand three hundred and ninety-eight dollars ($113,398) to the National Park Service (NPS) for riparian and upland habitat restoration in the lower Zuma Creek watershed, to implement the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan, approved by the Conservancy on August 2, 2001. This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any funds, the NPS shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy's Executive Officer a work program, budget, and schedule and the names of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the work."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria of Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Conservancy staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to $113,398 to the National Park Service (NPS) to remove invasive vegetation and restore 4.5 acres of riparian and upland habitat within a 200-foot buffer along lower Zuma Creek. The project area will be near the Bonsall Trailhead to the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA) of coastal Los Angeles County (Exhibits 2 and 3). Activities will include removal of the avocado trees and non-native invasive plant populations; collection, propagation, and installation of native plants; and adaptive management and project monitoring.

The site, located on federally-owned property, is an abandoned avocado grove dominated by dead and dying avocado trees and several non-native invasive species, including spurge, castor bean, fennel, and non-native grasses. Barren soil underneath the avocado trees and the existence of a non-native plant community has caused a reduction in water quality due to soil movement out of the grove and into Zuma Creek. In addition, this area has lost cover, foraging and nesting habitat for wildlife. The non-native invasive species are also encroaching further into other relatively pristine areas of Zuma Canyon.

Conservancy funds will be used for project coordination, tools and plant propagation. NPS staff will contribute the project design, oversight, and long-term maintenance and monitoring. NPS will partner with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to engage more than 3,000 students and other volunteers to restore the site over a two-year period under NPS supervision. Site weeding and native plant installation will be done by student volunteers. The NPS's restoration goals for the project are to attain a minimum of 60 percent native vegetation cover at the site within two years, and a 90-100 percent native cover within five years.

During the initial stage of the project, NPS staff will remove the avocado trees with chainsaws before any other activity is done on the site. Populations of exotic invasive plants will be treated throughout the two year project period, as well as for three years following project completion, using species-specific integrated pest management (IPM) practices. The majority of the restoration, including hand weeding and installation of native plants, will be done by student volunteers from the Los Angeles Unified School District., who will visit the site on one-day field trips. These student volunteers will work alongside and under the supervision of NPS staff. Seedling

removal will continue on a prescribed basis, and all areas disturbed by replanting with native species will be mulched with organic materials to discourage colonization by exotic species.

Seed collected from native plants elsewhere in Zuma Canyon will be propagated for use in restoring the site and will include such species as coyote bush, mugwort, willow, and California rose. After the initial planting by students and other volunteers, park staff will water, weed and mulch around the plants. Project monitoring will include such methods as time-lapse photography to document broad scale changes in vegetative cover and an annual census of 20 one-meter square plots within the project area.

The NPS has selected this site for restoration for several reasons. The presence of the avocado grove at the mouth of the canyon significantly reduces the ecological quality of the area and threatens to degrade both water quality and adjacent plant communities if not restored soon. The project is also one element of a larger project to restore this section of the canyon, which includes restoration of an adjacent fuel modification zone dominated by non-native annual grasses. Restoration of the avocado grove will contribute to a larger and more functional restoration area and enhance important riparian habitat---a critical but limited resource within the SMMNRA.

A secondary goal of the project is to educate more than 3,000 student volunteers about the impacts of invasive non-native species and the importance of watershed protection for ecological and human health. A minimum of 1,600 students will visit the site per year and engage in ecological restoration activities within the canyon. Each student will participate in lessons on watersheds ad invasive plants, as well as discovery hikes within the canyon.

At its April 20, 2006 meeting, the Governing Board of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission (SMBRC) authorized a grant of $113,398 of Proposition 12 funds administered by the Coastal Conservancy for projects within the Santa Monica Bay watershed to the National Park Service for this project (Exhibit 4)

SITE DESCRIPTION:

The Santa Monica Bay watershed encompasses approximately 400 square miles subdivided into 28 separate sub-watershed drainages. It includes two major topographic areas: the Los Angeles coastal plain and the Santa Monica Mountains. The Santa Monica Bay watershed is one of the nation's most highly urbanized regions. It encompasses residential areas, commercial and industrial areas and undeveloped open space lands, primarily within the Santa Monica Mountains. It is bordered on the north by the Santa Monica Mountains divide, on the east by Griffith Park, on the south by Point Fermin, and on the west by the eastern portion of Ventura County.

Zuma Canyon, located above Point Dune, is one of the most ecologically intact canyons in the Santa Monica Mountains. The majority of the canyon is protected by public ownership and contains little development. Over 5000 acres of diverse coastal sage scrub, chaparral and riparian communities provide habitat for many native species, including reptiles, amphibians, raptors, deer, bobcat, coyote, and mountain lions. Because of its pristine condition and diverse ecological communities, Zuma Canyon was acquired by the NPS in the early 1990s to become a com-

ponent of the SMMNRA.

At the entrance to the canyon is a small avocado orchard of about 7 acres located along Zuma Creek. The grove functioned as a commercial avocado operation from the late 1990s until early 2004. The vegetation community is virtually devoid of native plants. The understory is primarily bare soil, but includes scatted populations of several non-native species, such as Geraldton carnation spurge, castor bean, fennel, smilo grass and Harding grass. Because the site is no longer a producing agricultural operation, the absence of irrigation has resulted in dying avocado trees, with reduced root strength and soil holding capacity. The bare soil within the grove is also subject to frequent erosion and because much of the grove is located on hillside slopes immediately adjacent to the creek, soil lost during rainstorms often moves directly into Zuma Creek. The NPS estimates that if the site is not soon restored, the likelihood of slope failure from the avocado grove will increase substantially, degrading the water quality of the creek and Santa Monica Bay.

PROJECT HISTORY:

In recognition of the need to protect Santa Monica Bay and its sub-watersheds, in May, 1988, the State of California and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) nominated and included Santa Monica Bay in the National Estuary Program (NEP). Established under the Water Quality Act of 1987 and managed by the US EPA, the NEP includes more than two dozen significant estuaries and coastal water bodies nationwide.

As an NEP, the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project (SMBRP) is charged with assessing the Bay's pollution problems, and with producing the Bay Restoration Plan to serve as the blueprint for the Bay's long-term recovery. In 1995, the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan was approved by the State of California and the US EPA. The Bay Plan includes 250 actions, including specific actions focused on habitat conservation, enhancement and restoration, pollution prevention and treatment control, and assessment, education and monitoring.

The Bay Plan includes several goals, including: (1) reducing pollutant loadings to and prevent degradation of the waters of Santa Monica Bay; (2) reducing human health risks associated with swimming in or harvesting seafood from the Bay; and (3) restoring, rehabilitating and protecting the marine ecosystem, living resources and biodiversity of the Bay and its watersheds. Specifically, the Bay Plan has identified the protection, restoration, and creation of wetlands within the Bay as a major goal of the project.

The Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 (Proposition 12) earmarked $25,000,000 to the Coastal Conservancy for restoration of Santa Monica Bay in accordance with the goals and priorities of the Bay Plan. The Coastal Conservancy approved the Bay Plan on August 2, 2001.

Proposition 12 requires the Bay Watershed Council, the stakeholder board of the Restoration Project, to determine project eligibility and grant priorities. Working with Conservancy staff, the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project staff has solicited project proposals that would achieve the goals of the Bay Restoration Plan and address its water quality and natural resource protection objectives. The project being recommended for funding here has been approved for funding by the Bay Watershed Council and Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission (Exhibit 4).

PROJECT FINANCING:

Proposition 12: Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan	$113,398
National Park Service	$23,480
Volunteer nursery and field support (in-kind)	$189,395
Total Project Cost	**$326,263**

The source of Conservancy funds is an appropriation to the Conservancy from Proposition 12, the "Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000," for projects to implement the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270), regarding enhancement of coastal resources.

Under §31251, the Conservancy may award grants for enhancement of coastal resources that, because of natural or human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. Consistent with this section, the proposed project would lead to improvements in the quality and availability of degraded habitat in the Zuma Creek watershed of Santa Monica Bay and is therefore consistent with this section.

The proposed authorization is consistent with §31253, which states that the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. In the present instance the Conservancy's contribution would represent about 35 percent of the funds needed to carry out the project. As a federal agency, the National Park Service is a "public agency" within the meaning of §31017 and is therefore eligible to receive a grant from the Conservancy.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A**, the proposed project will help protect, restore and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas by restoring wildlife habitat along Zuma Creek, an important watershed of Santa Monica Bay and by promoting a partnership between the National Park Service and the Los Angeles Unified School District to engage school children in habitat restoration.

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective B**, the proposed project will help protect, restore and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas by restoring an important section of the Zuma Creek stream corridor linking coastal habitats with upland habitats in the Santa Monica Mountains.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective C**, the proposed project will help protect, restore and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas by eradicating non-native invasive species that threaten na-

tive coastal habitats and by promoting outreach and education to students and other volunteers about non-native species.

Consistent with **Goal 6 Objective A,** the proposed project will improve water quality, habitat and other coastal resources within a priority coastal watershed by enhancing riparian habitat and promoting public outreach and community involvement in habitat restoration.

Consistent with **Goal 6 Objective B,** the proposed project will improve water quality, habitat and other coastal resources within a priority coastal watershed by reducing sediment input into Zuma Creek and Santa Monica Bay and thereby improving water quality to benefit coastal resources.

The Santa Monica Mountains are cited in the Coastal Conservancy's *Strategic Plan* (2003, at page 56) as a locus for Goals 5 (Coast/Ocean Habitat) and 6 (Wetlands, Rivers & Watersheds) of the Plan.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, adopted on January 24, 2001:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** These projects will be funded with monies appropriated to the Conservancy from Proposition 12 for implementing the Santa Monica Bay Plan. The proposed project is consistent with the Bay Plan and this project has been approved by the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission (Exhibit 4).
3. **Support from the public:** Implementation of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan has widespread public and agency support. The Santa Monica Bay Watershed Council includes members from private industry, the general public, community environmental organizations, as well as local, regional, state and federal agencies. Non-native invasive species are a continuing threat to the ecological health of the Santa Monica Bay watershed, and the restoration of native watershed habitats has been identified as a priority objective by the Council.
4. **Location:** The proposed projects are located within Santa Monica Bay and the Zuma Creek sub-watershed drainage.
5. **Need:** The non-native and invasive species at this site threaten to impact adjacent areas of the Zuma Creek watershed. Action to remove these species and revegetate the area with native species will help address current erosion problems in Zuma Creek. Conservancy funding is needed to implement this project.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Zuma Creek is a part of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area which includes 153,075 acres and is the world's largest urban national park.

The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area was established in 1978 to protect one of the last remaining examples of a relatively undisturbed Mediterranean-type ecosystem in the world. The project is also in the watershed of the Santa Monica Bay, which has been identified by both the State of California and the US EPA has a coastal water body of national significance. Restoration of native vegetation and protection of riparian habitat is a one of the priorities of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project.

Additional Criteria

1. **Urgency:** The proposed grant will significantly aid current efforts to protect natural resources at risk from various encroachments and threats, including non–point source pollution.
2. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will address coastal resource protection, habitat restoration and species protection, water quality and watershed resource protection, and public education.
3. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above. The match by the National Park Service coupled with the value of the services contributed by volunteers represents 65 percent of the project costs.

12. **Readiness:** By its implementation and completion of previous projects funded by the Coastal Conservancy, the National Park Service has demonstrated its ability to start and finish this project in a timely manner.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Coastal Conservancy has been involved in resource protection, enhancement and restoration projects within the Santa Monica Bay watershed for more than a decade, including projects focused on improving coastal water quality and coastal nearshore resources within the Bay. Implementation of this project at this time will contribute to the fulfillment of long-standing Conservancy goals. The Coastal Conservancy has also been involved in enhancement and restoration planning in the watersheds of the Santa Monica Mountains for the past several years. Currently the Coastal Conservancy is providing staff and financial resources for the several habitat restoration and coastal access projects within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.
15. **Cooperation:** The Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project is a cooperative venture involving a broad range of interested and affected stakeholders including private industry, citizens, environmental groups, and local, regional, state and federal agencies. In addition, this particular project would represent a significant level of cooperation among the National Park Service, Los Angeles Unified School District, and other community volunteers.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project---located in a designated Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Area (ESHA) of the City of Malibu ---is consistent with the policy goals of the Land Use Plan (LCP) of the City of Malibu's certified Local Coastal Plan, including those that call for protection of ESHAs against significant disruption of habitat values (§§3.8 and 3.23), prescribe natural buffer areas

around parklands (§3.24), and encourage habitat restoration and invasive plant eradication to prevent soil erosion and stream siltation (§3.45) or protect and enhance habitat values (§§3.25 and 3.50). Invasive plant eradication and other restoration projects whose primary purpose is habitat restoration are a permitted use in an ESHA under the LCP's Local Implementation Plan.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15333 because it consists of a project not to exceed five acres in size to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife and (a) there would be no significant adverse impact on endangered, rare or threatened species or their habitat pursuant to section 15065; (b) there are no hazardous materials at or around the project site that may be disturbed or removed; and (c) the project will not result in impacts that are significant when viewed in connection with the effects of past projects, the effects of other current projects, and the effects of probable future projects.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.